**Have Sports Teams Brought Down America’s Schools?**

By [Elizabeth Kolbert](http://www.newyorker.com/contributors/elizabeth-kolbert)

September 5, 2013 www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/have-sports-teams-brought-down-americas-schools

the latest Programme for International Student Assessment, or PISA, [results are announced](http://www.oecd.org/pisa/aboutpisa/), it’s safe to predict that American high-school students will once again display their limited skills in math and reading. They will once again be outscored not just by students in Poland but also by students in places like South Korea, Belgium, the Netherlands, Finland, Singapore, New Zealand, Canada, Switzerland, and Japan. (In the last round of PISA tests, administered in 2009, U.S. students ranked thirty-first in math and seventeenth in reading , among seventy-four countries.) Meanwhile, they will have played some very exciting football games, which will have been breathlessly written up in their hometown papers. (Ripley notes that at each Gettysburg High football game “no less than four local reporters showed up.”)

Why does this situation continue? Well, for one thing, kids like it. My sons love everything about soccer: the practices, which are held rain or shine; the games, from which they sometimes do not return until nine o’clock at night; the sweaty socks and the cleats and the jerseys—one color for home games and another for away.

But adults generally do not—and certainly should not—leave educational policy to fourteen-year-olds. According to Ripley, however, one of the problems with the American educational system is that parents seem to like the arrangement, too. She describes a tour she took of a private school in Washington, D.C., that costs thirty thousand dollars a year. The tour leader—a mother with three children in the school—was asked about the school’s flaws. When she said that the math program was weak, none of the parents taking the tour reacted. When she said that the football program was weak, the parents suddenly became concerned. “Really?” one of them asked worriedly. “What do you mean?”

“Even wealthy American parents didn’t care about math as much as football,” Ripley concluded.

One of the ironies of the situation is that sports reveal what is possible. American kids’ performance on the field shows just how well they can do when expectations are high and they put their minds to it. It’s too bad that their test scores show the same thing. •

In her new book, “The Smartest Kids in the World,” Amanda Ripley, an investigative journalist, tells the story of Tom, a high-school student from Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, who decides to spend his senior year in Wroclaw, Poland. Poland is a surprising educational success story: in the course of less than a decade, the country raised students’ test scores from significantly below average for the developed world to significantly above it; Polish kids now outscore American kids in math and science, even though Poland spends, on average, less than half as much per student as the United States does. One of the most striking differences between the high school Tom attended in Gettysburg and the one he ends up at in Wroclaw is that the latter has no football team, or, for that matter, teams of any kind.

Sports, Ripley writes, were “the core culture of Gettysburg High.” In Wroclaw, by contrast, if kids wanted to play soccer or basketball after school they had to organize the games themselves. Teachers didn’t double as coaches and the principal certainly never came out to cheer. Thus, “there was no confusion about what school was for—or what mattered to the kids’ life chances.”

I thought about Tom the other day, while I was watching my fourteen-year-old twins play soccer. It was the day before school began, but they had already been going to J.V. soccer practice two hours a day for nearly two weeks. I wondered what would have happened if their math teacher had tried to call them in two weeks before school started to hold two-hour drill sessions. My sons would have been livid, as would every other kid in their class. Perhaps even more significant, I suspect that parents would have complained. What was the math teacher doing, trying to ruin the kids’ summer? And why should they have to make a special trip to the high school so their kids could study trig identities?

That American high schools lavish more time and money on sports than on math is, I know, an old complaint. (In the interest of full disclosure, I should note that my own experience with high-school sports was limited to being cut from the tennis team.) But, as another school year starts, it is a lament worth revisiting. This is not a matter of how any given student who play sports does in school, but of the culture and its priorities. This December, when